Sense of Support in the Work of Early Education Teachers from Big Cities and Small Towns / Villages: Perspective of Inclusive Education Children with Disabilities in Poland

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ABSTRACT:

Inclusive education is a challenge for educational systems around the world. The major issue affecting inclusive education is the limited support for teachers in implementing inclusive education and working with diverse students.

The primary aim of this study was to define the differences in the subjective sense of professional support (institutional and non-institutional) of early education teachers from big cities and small towns/villages in Poland via the survey research method.

There is a significantly higher reported sense of support in the workplace for early education teachers from big cities compared to small towns/villages in Poland. Regarding the investigated institutional support categories, only support from trained professionals in the education of students with special educational needs (outside the didactic process) and support from other teachers (within the didactic process) was significantly different and ranked higher in teachers from big cities. For the non-institutional support categories, only support from friends and acquaintances was significantly higher in the early education teachers from big cities. Moreover, the poor network of specialist support in small towns/villages in Poland may further exacerbate the inequalities observed in the success of implementing the inclusive education idea.

Keywords: elementary school teacher; inclusive education; support in the workplace

INTRODUCTION

The topic of support during the pandemic has gained considerable importance. It is of social interest whether the experience of global crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus will result in greater social integration, a stronger sense of unity, support, or whether it will only exacerbate the social inequalities and hence, become a threat to implementing many developmental strategies, including inclusive education.

What underpins inclusive education, as is the case with many other policies, is the idea of social fairness. According to it, it is believed that all students, regardless of their capabilities and developmental difficulties, have the same right to education without any formal restrictions. This moral imperative is reflected in initiatives undertaken throughout the world (UNESCO, 2005). However, understanding the concept of inclusive education differs depending on the region of the world. It continues to evolve as the implementation steps are being taken (Ruppar et al., 2018). Depending on the level of inclusive actions in different countries, the main areas of chances/barriers are also identified differently.

The success of inclusive education is largely dependent on the attitude of teachers directly involved in the process. (Mittler, 2000; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Jordan et al., 2009; Rakap & Kaczmarek, 2010). Teachers who have a positive approach towards inclusive education are more willing and more effective in supporting the children in the process of adaptation. Considering their capabilities and needs, teachers modify the curriculum to enable the students to master it (Buell et al. 1999). Inclusive education has no chance of success without the support of teachers (Ross-Hill, 2009). It is further highlighted by the reported importance of supportive approaches and attitudes of teachers towards the idea of inclusion (Black-Hawkins et al., 2010). Other factors, however, such as teachers' fears connected with including students with special needs in regular classes (Forlin, 2001), affect the effectiveness of inclusive education. These difficulties can be overcome by the cooperation among the teachers (Hamaidi et al., 2012; Bouillet, 2013), including exchange of the ideas, or designing actions adjusted to the needs of a child (Robinson & Buly, 2007).

Despite all the evidence of difficulties and approaches mitigating them, the main barrier remains the lack of knowledge and competencies to work with children with special needs (SEN). Teachers from the majority of countries claim that they do not have the required competencies to work with disabled children (Westwood, 2013). They also point towards the lack of preparation on higher education levels to work in inclusive education conditions (Mitchell & Hedge, 2007). All of this relates to teachers' sense of professional support. There is no doubt that more substantial support facilitates a better, more optimistic vision of work (Lee et al., 2015). However, numerous studies also point to the connection between teachers' subjective sense of support and professional burn-out (Brudnik, 2009; González-Morales et al., 2010; Maslach et al. 2001).

The sole notion of social support is ambiguous. Social support can be perceived structurally or functionally. In the first case, either the subjective characteristics (the size of support, cohesion, accessibility) or the sources of support (family, friends, work environment) are measured (Halbesleben, 2006). Depending on the situation in which the support is being given, different factors play the leading role. Consequently, in the case of professional conditions, the support from the superiors (Russell et al., 1987) or co-workers (Burke & Greenglass, 1993) seems to be the most relevant. Instead, the functional approach focuses on the quality of support rather than the number of social interactions under challenging situations. Due to the context of social exchange, the following types of support are mostly mentioned: emotional, informative, instrumental, and financial (Cohen & Wills, 1985). These are often inter-connected (Frese, 1999). Past reports point to social support's vital role in counteracting professional burn-out (Van Dick & Wagner, 2001; Bakker et al., 2007).

The present study aims to define the differences in the subjective sense of professional support (institutional and non-institutional) of early education teachers from big cities and small towns/villages in Poland.

The research problems are embedded in the questions derived from the aim of the study.

- How do the early education teachers from big cities and small towns/villages differ in the subjective sense of support in the workplace and outside of it in the perspective of inclusive education?

- How far is the workplace of early education teachers (big city – small town/village) differentia-

ting the perception of the chances of success of inclusive education of specific groups of students with special educational needs?

The results obtained will provide a valuable resource to understand the needs of teachers and some of the aspects conditioning the success of inclusive education regarding the students with SEN connected with the sense of professional support. Therefore, the results would be of the utmost importance for implementing inclusive education in Poland. It would also allow us to distinguish between acceptance and non-acceptance of inclusive education as a beneficial solution for students with SEN, including disabilities.

METHODS

Study participants

The study was conducted using the survey research method applied by the early education teachers of widely accessible primary schools from big cities (above 500,000) and smaller towns/villages (below 20,000). The criteria for inclusion were: the place of work of the teacher – city above 500,000 citizens or a city below 20,000 citizens/village; educational stage the teacher is working at – years I-III of primary mainstream school. The exclusion criterion was the teacher's inexperience in working with a disabled child at a mainstream school (in the school where the teacher works, the student was never a disabled child).

In the first phase, randomly selected schools were contacted from the southern, northern and central regions of Poland. Two to three schools from big cities (between six and nine schools in total) and four to six from small towns/villages (between twelve and twenty-four schools in total) were contacted from each region. Out of forty schools contacted, only 75% agreed to participate in the survey: ten schools from big cities and twenty from small cities/villages. Eighty-five early education teachers from big cities, and sixty-one early education teachers from small towns/villages were contacted. Sixty-four early education teachers from big cities and forty-six early education teachers from small towns/villages responded and partook in the study.

The study was conducted within the frames of a naturalistic paradigm (quantitative) and as an exploratory (diagnostic) research (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). The questionnaire was developed considering the specific politi-

cal and socio-cultural conditions of the education system in Poland. The systemic transformations of the 1990s were the beginning of a change not only in the political but also educational system. At that time, a new type of school appeared in Poland - the "integration school". An integrated class consists of twenty students, including up to five people with disabilities and two teachers, one trained in providing service for students with special educational needs. However, due to the insufficient number of integration schools in relation to the needs, only a fraction of students with disabilities in Poland attended this type of school. Since 2005, as a result of legislative changes, mainstream schools have been obliged to admit students with disabilities, thus creating the "inclusive school". However, thus far, mainstream schools in Poland lack solutions such as field teachers or student support. Therefore, in the Polish educational system, the "integration school" and the "inclusive school" are not synonymous.

The questionnaire consists of two sub-scales: 1) the sense of support at the workplace and 2) the sense of support outside of the workplace. The first sub-scale includes such categories as: didactic support of special teachers (support in terms of teaching methods, content of education, organizational forms of education adjusted to needs and possibilities of students with special educational needs – SEN); upbringing support of teachers in everyday educational classes (support related to the behaviour of students with SEN in classes and outside of them, peer relations: students with SEN and without SEN); didactic-educational support of psychologists (diagnosis of needs, didactic and educational possibilities, problem solving in peer relations); cooperation in terms of professional development on the school premises (team solving of didactic and educational problems, class observations, supervisions, developing workshops on the school premises); support of the head of school (support in solving individual didactic and educational problems of specific teachers, emotional, motivational support, support of interpersonal relations within the team, support in professional development). The second subscale is connected with support outside of the workplace and includes the support of friends/acquaintances (motivational, emotional, instrumental support); the teacher's own family (motivational, emotional, instrumental support), and the students' parents (motivational, emotional, instrumental support, cooperation). The questionnaire's theoretical and content-related accuracy is based on the research results and related to the phe-
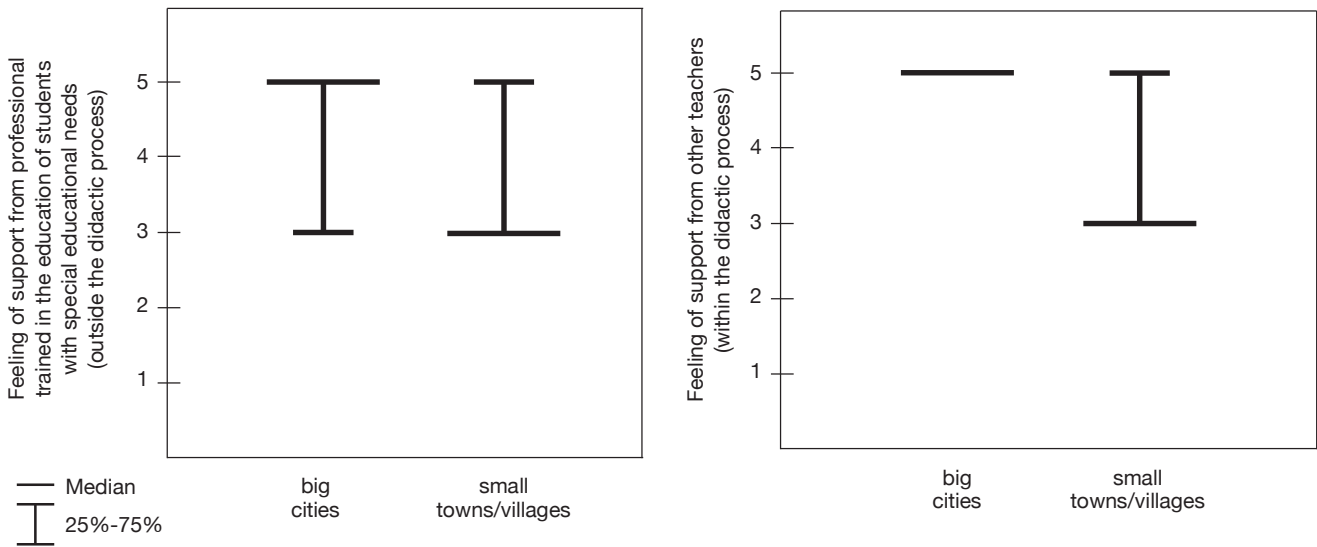
Figure 1.

**Sense of professional support (institutional support)
– in the opinion of teachers from big cities and small towns/villages**

nomenon of professional stress or burn-out (Antoniou et al., 2000; Center & Steventon, 2001; Kyriacou & Chien, 2004; Pines, 2000). The questionnaire was constructed and verified by a team of competent judges from the Institute of Special Educational Needs, Department of Educational Studies of the University of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznan.

The subjective sense of support and personal opinion on chances of successful inclusive education in 12 groups with special educational needs were measured using a five-point Likert scale.

THE DATA ANALYSIS

The results from Likert scales were evaluated using non-parametric methods. In order to compare the differences between the groups, the Mann-Whitney U test was applied. The correlation between the perceived chances of introducing inclusive education for SEN students and the sense of support was investigated using Spearman correlation. For group comparisons, median, 1st and 3rd quantile were provided; for the correlations, Spearman's Rho was reported. P-values of less than 0.05 were statistically significant; correction for multiple testing was applied according to the Bonferroni-Holm method. Statistical analysis was performed in Microsoft Excel (2017) and Statistica 13.1 software.

RESULTS

Altogether, sixty-four early education teachers from big cities and forty-six early education teachers from small towns/villages responded to the study questionnaire. We observed a significant difference in the subjective sense of support in the workplace within early education teachers

Table 1. **Selected correlations between the categories of support received by early education teachers from small towns/villages and the chances of students' groups with SEN in inclusive education**

	LID	M/SID	HH	D	VI	B	A	AS	PhD	MD	CD	ChI
teacher support in solving individual problems - headmaster	.37*	.36*	.73***	.48***	.66***	.28	.60***	.48***	.59***	.46**	.63***	.56***
support for teacher's profesional development – headmaster	.37*	.25***	.70***	.51***	.64*	.31***	.49**	.39***	.53	.37*	.53***	.50***

p * <.05, ** <.01, ***<.001; **LID** – student with low intellectual disability, **M/SID** – student with moderate/significant intellectual disability, **HH** – student with hard of hearing, **D** – deaf student, **B** – blind student, **A** – autistic student, **AS** – student with Asperger syndrome, **PhD** – student with physical disability, **MD** – student with multiple disability, **CD** – student with communication disability, **ChI** – student with chronic illness
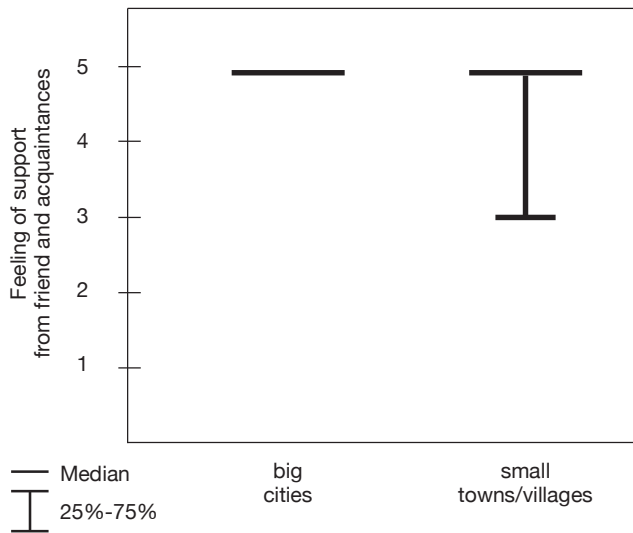
Figure 2.

A sense of professional support (non-institutional support) – in the opinion of teachers from big cities and small towns/villages

(big cities median: 42.25%-75%: 35.5-45; small cities/villages median: 37; 25%-75%: 27-45; p=2.99e-2). Teachers from bigger cities presented higher responses for the sense of support from professionals trained in the education of students with special educational needs (outside the didactic process) and from other teachers (within the didactic process) (p=6.07e-4, 7.82e-4, respectively).

The overall sense of support outside of the workplace was lower for small towns/villages than for big cities. However, the results did not reach significance (median: 14.25%-75%: 13-15; median: 13.25%-75%: 9-15, p=9.57e-2). Significantly higher responses were observed only for the sense of support from friends and acquaintances (p=1.09e-3).

The lowest sense of support in both groups was reported for the support provided by students' parents (big cities median: 4.25%-75%: 3-5; small towns/villages median: 3.25%-75%: 3-5).

The sense of support may directly or indirectly affect the teachers' perceived chances of successfully introducing inclusive education. Therefore, Spearman correlation was applied to determine the impact of self-assessment of subjective sense of support on the perceived chances of success to test these relations. Only subscales displaying significant relevance to the perceived chances of success in at least 3 SEN groups after the correction for multiple testing were presented below.

Teachers from small towns and villages presented a higher association between the sense of support from the head of school, while it was less relevant for teachers from big cities. However, in teachers from big cities, the support from special educators (didactic support and upbringing support) and psychologists' support highly influenced perceived chances of success for inclusive education.

DISCUSSION

A relatively positive picture emerges regarding the sense of support received by the teachers in the workplace. Regardless of the support category in a workplace, its perception is higher in the group of teachers from big cities than in the group from small towns/villages (the differences are statistically important). It means that it is actually in these environments where actions are needed to intensify the support. It is quite important as in Poland, according to the data from 2018, more than 20 million (20.3 million) people live in small towns/villages which is more than 50% of the country's population. According to the General Statistical Office (GUS) the-

Table 2.

Selected correlations between the categories of support received by early education teachers from big cities and opinions about students with SEN in inclusive education

	LID	M/SID	HH	D	VI	B	A	AS	PhD	MD	CD	ChI
Special educator – didactic support	.40**	.24	.50***	.57***	.28*	.37**	.23	.24	.36**	.35**	.28*	.39**
Special educator – upbringing support	.46***	.39**	.47***	.58***	.28*	.44***	.28*	.15	.41***	.52***	.45***	.57***
Psychologist support	.46***	.32**	.68***	.63***	.44***	.39**	.28*	.29*	.33**	.52***	.35**	.48***

p * <.05, ** <.01, ***<.001; **LID** – student with low intellectual disability, **M/SID** – student with moderate/significant intellectual disability, **HH** – student with hard of hearing, **D** – deaf student, **B** – blind student, **A** – autistic student, **AS** – student with Asperger syndrome, **PhD** – student with physical disability, **MD** – student with multiple disability, **CD** – student with communication disability, **ChI** – student with chronic illness

re are about 1.419 million primary school students in cities and almost 1.239 million in villages (Education in 2017/2018, 2018, 127-128). Thus, lower sense of support received by teachers in small towns can affect their work quality and, what is more, the educational situation of over 46% of primary school students, including students of 1st - 3rd grades. The latest international research results are also worrying TIMSS-2019 (Mullis et. al., 2020). The results show that the level of mathematics and science competencies of Polish students of 4th grade is visibly lower than in the year 2015. In the case of mathematics, the drop is by 15 points and in science by 16 points which, according to experts, is a significant change (Mullis et al., 2020, 17 & 88).

The results of the research show that regardless of whether the teacher works in a big city or a small town/ village one of the highest indicators of sense of support refers to the support received from the head of school. Similar results were obtained in research done in China (Xu & Malinen, 2015). The authors point out that high indicators in the case of this category of support can result from the will of presenting their superiors in a positive light. Other research from this region also confirms this tendency (Wang et al., 2013).

The results reveal that Polish teachers are rather content with the support they receive (4.1 – the bottom level for the high sense of support in big cities; and 3.9 – top level for an average sense of support in small towns/villages). International research TIMSS-19 shows, however, that the sense of support in the work of Polish teachers is one of the lowest among 64 countries taking part in the research. Only 32% of Polish teachers are very satisfied with work (this is the second lowest result in the research), and as much as 18% are unsatisfied. This is definitely the highest result in comparison to all other countries (Mullis et al. 2020, 405-406).

The connections between the support categories and the evaluation of chances of respective groups of students with SEN in inclusive education show that it is the support of the head of school which constitutes a significant variable in the group of teachers from small towns/villages. On the other hand, in the case of big cities, it is the support of specialists such as special educators and psychologists. It is a result of differentiated work conditions in each of the environments. In big cities specialists working in multiple clinics, that is, psychological-pedagogical, are more easily accessible. The network of these places secures the needs of teachers and students. The

contact with specialists can be systematic, ongoing and constant. It is different in the case of small towns/villages where the contact with specialists often requires covering large distances. The possibilities are smaller in terms of ongoing help (support) in dynamically changing situations. That is why the support of the head of school as a direct superior is so valued. The teachers expect that the head of school will support them personally or will undertake a systemic action, to which he is authorized, in order to resolve difficult situations within the school. The problem of insufficient support of specialist staff supporting teachers working with SEN students is also discussed by researchers from other countries (Koutrouba et.al., 2006).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results show that the higher the level of sense of support the bigger the chances for a positive perception of SEN students' chances in inclusive education by early education teachers. However, different aspects seem to be important for each group of teachers in the context of chances of success of the inclusive actions towards students with SEN. In the group of teachers from big cities it is the sense of support from specialists, special educators, and psychologists which exerts the biggest influence on the positive perception of the chances in inclusive education of students with SEN. In the case of teachers from small towns/villages – it is the support received from the superior (the head of school). The differentiation of the results is an effect of the research that was conducted in each of the groups. There is no doubt, however, that cooperation with different specialists, depending on the needs of the student, would be a better solution for a more effective and high-quality work. In particular, working in inclusive education settings and with a differentiated group will require support from a variety of professionals. Its character will differ, and in some cases, it will be an ongoing effort while in others, it will be more incidental depending on the students' individual needs and the level of intensity of support. Sometimes, there will be a need to support the everyday activity of the teacher and the student while in other cases, it could be limited to guidance or workshops. A lower sense of support received by the teachers from small towns/villages, with poor network of specialist support, can have negative consequences on the development and implementation of the idea of inclusive education. It needs

to be remembered that inclusive education is one of the options in Poland, the educational path is chosen by the student's parents based on, amongst other things, the conditions offered. It is possible that they may favour a specialist in integrated education over inclusion, simply because specialized support in these forms of education is legally guaranteed.

As far as recommendations are concerned, attention should be drawn to the model of education for all, currently being discussed in Poland, which provides, in addition to various support mechanisms for the teacher, the need to employ specialists, in proportion to the number of students (these specialists would include special educators, psychologists, speech therapists). If this model meets with a positive outcome of public and institutio-

nal consultations, it is possible that also schools in small towns/villages will gain permanent support in the form of specialists. It is vital since, as the results of the research conducted on teachers from big cities show, this cooperation has a valid and positive impact on the perception of educational chances of students with SEN.

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